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AUTHOR Irby, Beverly J.; Brown, Genevieve
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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a study that analyzed 91 written reflections in the professional-development portfolios of 13 doctoral students in educational leadership. The purpose of the research was to determine dichotomous expressions of thoughts between eight males (56 reflections) and five females (35 reflections). The study took place in a regional university in Texas. Participants for the study were all administrators in schools or universities and were in the first year of their program. Analysis of the written reflections reveals that the students' reflections were consistently the same length. In examining the structure of the reflections, 38 percent of the men, but almost none of the women, used bulleted or numbered lists. Men were also more likely to have grammatical errors than women. An analysis of voice revealed that women used the third person more extensively than men and their reflections were more clinical sounding, as if they were quoting authorities. All of the men used the first person and wrote with authority. The participants' degree of self confidence, therefore, was another theme that emerged. The women's work appeared passive and tentative, while the men's reflections expressed confidence, assertiveness, and decisiveness. Overall, the study revealed gendered dichotomies in five areas: length, structure, voice, confidence, and collaboration. (RJM)

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A Gendered Dichotomy in Written Reflections in Professional Development Portfolios

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Beverly J. Irby, Ed.D.
Associate Professor
Coordinator of Research
Center for Research and Doctoral Studies in Educational Leadership
Department of Educational Leadership & Counseling
Sam Houston State University
P.O. Box 2119
Huntsville, TX 77341
Direct Phone #: 409-294-1134
Departmental Phone #: 409-294-1147

Genevieve Brown, Ed.D.
Professor
Department Chair
Center for Research and Doctoral Studies in Educational Leadership
Department of Educational Leadership & Counseling
Sam Houston State University
P.O. Box 2119
Huntsville, TX 77341
Departmental Phone #: 409-294-1147

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, Canada, April 22, 1999.

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A Gendered Dichotomy in Written Reflections in Professional Development Portfolios

Reflective individuals recognize the importance of reflection for improvement, and according to Brown and Irby (1997), they believe that to improve their own performance, they must make self-assessment an integral part of their routine. Furthermore, these individuals draw upon their intuitive understandings about their practice, seek out new understandings regarding the particular problem at hand, and connect those intuitive thoughts with new ones (Brown & Irby, 1997; Pigford, 1995).

Recognizing that they must enrich and deepen their own understanding regarding current theory and best practice, reflective leaders read widely, attend relevant professional meetings, coursework, and workshops, join study or focus groups, and seek dialogue with colleagues. They also recognize that they must change as circumstances, events, and the environment change and as new information becomes available (Brown & Irby, 1997).

The professional development portfolio is an important vehicle for encouraging reflection. Reflection inherent in the professional development portfolio process: (a) provides insights into strengths and weaknesses, and (b) encourages planning for future learning and growth (Brown & Irby, 1997).

The purpose of this study was to analyze 91 written reflections in professional development portfolios of 13 doctoral students in educational leadership to determine dichotomous expressions of thoughts between eight males (56 reflections) and five females (35 reflections). While much research exists on gender differences in oral language, there is little that analyzes written language differences (Prouty, 1995).

Theoretical Framework

Although recent literature advocates looking at similarities rather than differences between males and females in communication styles (Crawford, 1995; Canary & Dindia, 1998; Johnson & Meinhof, 1997; Jones, 1999), our premise is that differences, as well as similarities (dichotomies of voice) between males and females should be investigated, particularly in areas that have not yet

been explored. One such area is the personal, professional reflection that is placed within a professional development portfolio and that accompanies an artifact denoting an experience(s) of growth. The goal of this study is to establish baseline data and lines of further research in the area of gendered dichotomies in written reflective narrative among practicing and aspiring leaders.

Methodology

Participants and Setting

This study took place in a regional university in Texas within the doctoral program for educational leadership. The participants were five female and eight male doctoral students in the first year of their program. All participants are administrators in schools or universities, and all were enrolled in the same course in instructional leadership theory.

Collection of Data

The professional development portfolio was used to collect data during the semester-long process of implementing the study:

1. Each student was provided guidelines and instruction on how to develop a professional development portfolio and how to write reflections on experiences in instructional leadership. Brown and Irby's (1997) five-step reflection cycle was used to offer a structure that, although somewhat prescriptive, allowed for individuality, while controlling for format. The steps are intended to serve as a general outline: **Select** the artifact that is most representative of the experience, **Describe** the circumstances, situation, or events related to the experience, **Analyze** the experience as to personal and professional belief system, **Appraise** the events and evaluate the impact and appropriateness of actions taken, and **Transform** the experience into future practices and development (Brown & Irby, 1997).
2. Each student was required to include artifacts and reflections addressing seven instructional leadership proficiencies.
3. Students were told that artifacts and reflections from the assigned professional development portfolio could be included in a career advancement portfolio.

4. All 13 professional development portfolios were collected for review.

Research Question

One question was established for collecting baseline descriptive and comparative data for this study: What dichotomies emerged in written reflections by gender?

Analysis of the Data

Data were collected through analysis of the written reflections in the professional development portfolios. The data collected were coded and categorized through process coding (Roth, 1977). Triangulation of the data was established through the use of multiple researcher analysis method (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996).

Results

An analysis of the written reflections of 13 doctoral students in an educational leadership program was conducted to determine dichotomies in written language between males and females. Upon analysis, five themes emerged related to similarities and differences between male and female reflections. A discussion of each follows.

Length of Reflections

Although the professor did not specify length, the students' reflections were consistent, with an average length of two pages. Flowers and LePage (1995) found that the average output of pages for females was five compared to seven for men. Because the written work analyzed in this study consisted of reflections about artifacts for a professional development portfolio, it is possible that the length was related to purpose and that the length would be more consistent.

Structure of Reflections

When analyzing the structure of the reflections, it was determined that use of lists was non-existent among female writers, but 38% of the men used bulleted or numbered lists. Also, men were more likely to have grammatical errors than women.

Voice in Reflections

An analysis of voice in the written reflections revealed that women used third person more extensively and that their reflections were more clinical sounding, as if they were quoting authorities, not as if they were authorities. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1996) demonstrated that women have five basic ways of knowing: Silence, Received Knowledge, Subjective Knowledge, Procedural Knowledge, and Constructed Knowledge. They indicate that women move in stages of having no voice to having a strong voice. Beginning out of fear of their own words, women first rely upon authorities (Received Knowledge), only then to move to viewing themselves as authorities (Subjective Knowledge). Afterward, they seek out procedures that will help them know (Procedural Knowledge), then they move to connecting their experiences with that of authorities, constructing their own world view (Constructed Knowledge). These ways of knowing appear to relate to the way in which the women and men in our study have expressed voice within their narratives. The following comments are representative of the person and the passive tonality of the reflections in which women are writing more in third person and are relating artifacts to persons or organizations of authority, illustrating what Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1996) call Received Knowledge:

> "It also could potentially contribute to education policy and practice. Since no clear prescriptions are available for selecting teachers and assigning students, this suggests the need for relevant research to better understand the consequences of student performance of assigning and grouping students with specific teachers."
>
> "Tyler's interview gave a historical perspective of authentic assessment…."
>
> "Dr. ----- has considerable experience working with gifted programs in the Houston area and presented relevant topics."
>
> "Improving the discourse about schooling among teachers and administrators will be required if public education efforts are to survive the challenges of our times."

> "Payne's book describes the public with whom we work. Haberman's book reveals the qualities of a star teacher of poverty-touched children."

In some instances the women's writing evidenced Procedural Knowledge. For example, some wrote:

> "I was asked to find a way for our teachers to implement curriculum compacting in our school. I researched different avenues to address the issue through professional development."
>
> "The principal must make sure that authentic assessment is a priority for all teachers, and then implement steps to safeguard its success in the classroom."
>
> "To further my options, my plans include creating a personal webpage prior to the start of the semester. Presently, I have researched the methods available for creating webpages and am trying to decide....."
>
> "Another feedback item was a query about what the person had learned. The third item was a query about what was unclear in the training."
>
> "My study of authentic assessment led me to better understand the philosophical basis for alternatives to standardized testing. I will include staff development that focuses on the development of authentic assessment at the beginning of the year inservice in order to facilitate a more thorough implementation into the curriculum."

The women did not exhibit other stages of knowledge within their reflections.

Analysis of voice used by male students indicated that 100% of the males used first person consistently; only in two reflections did their writing represent Received Knowledge. Rather, the majority of their writings represented Subjective Knowledge and Constructed Knowledge. Examples of Subjective Knowledge as indicated by the males:

> "To rely solely on this assessment model in its purest form will result in confusion on the part of the students and others."
>
> "Technology is commonly thought of in terms of machinery, but I also consider it as the method by which ideas are transmitted."

> "While many may think that putting Hispanic students first is inappropriate, it is merely a short-term strategy which must occur in order that we can overcome the results of this population being ignored for so many years before. Something as simple as a few more bilingual office workers can make a significant difference in the attendance of our Hispanic students.. and we know that unless a student is in school, it is virtually impossible for him to learn."
>
> "Society has determined that technology can and will produce a student with an ability to perform to increasingly higher standards. This is simply not the case. I acknowledge that technology can produce a more creative and intellectual classroom, but the role of the instructor will always remain the single most important element in the educational process."

Constructed knowledge was frequently evidenced in the males' reflections. Representative comments follow:

> "As an instructional leader, I am especially interested in being able to support the development of teachers' understanding and appreciation of the many complex influences impacting students' success. My reflection on these two artifacts has enhanced my desire to commit institutional resources and energy towards development of the four senses in students."
>
> "The organizational chart is an example of how I restructured the technology department to maximize the skills of the available resources – people. This also involved restructuring the ways that some things were always done."
>
> "My involvement and experiences in these processes has helped me become more aware of the varied needs of diverse populations. It has also provided me with opportunities to investigate and observe the dedication and commitment which many manifest in their efforts to meet students' needs."

Confidence in Reflections

Confidence was a theme that emerged from the analysis of the reflections. The women's work appeared passive and tentative, while the men's reflections expressed confidence, assertiveness, and decisiveness. According to Shepard (1998) and Mindell (1997), women often give the impression of a lack of self-confidence by using qualifying statements and hedges such as "I feel," "I believe," or "Perhaps." Although four of the women leaders wrote some of their reflections (10) in first person, their work still failed to communicate confidence because of their extensive use of such qualifiers. Examples follow:

> "I believe the use of the Powerpoint presentation system could eventually be used by teachers....It might prove beneficial to bring this mission statement before my staff...."
>
> "If at all possible, I plan to continue to... It is likely my dissertation research will also focus...."
>
> "I want to model continued study for my staff and I encourage them to further their education."
>
> "In the future, I would like to revisit both books as a refresher and to continue use of our interview procedures."
>
> "I considered it to be essential that curriculum improvement efforts address alignment with standards along with vertical and horizontal scope and sequence of skills and content taught, improved assessments, best practice in conducting professional growth for teachers all directed toward student achievement."
>
> "I would like to see lesson plans and gradebooks on computer within the next year."
>
> "I also believe that there is additional work needed in the identification process."

Confidence was observed consistently in all of the male reflections. All men wrote in first person, and only one of the men used "I believe" or other hedging language. The

reflections by the males contained "must" statements, reflected feelings of adequacy, accomplishments, and pride in their skills and were direct, authoritative, and purposeful. Additionally, the men's writing contained frequent references to their successful experiences and effective leadership:

> "These artifacts help demonstrate my situational supervision capabilities that I must use as I work with a wide range of education and skill levels – from high school graduates to Ph.D.'s, from clerical, technical, and labor skills to highly specialized and trained analysists."
>
> "My experiences…implementing these procedures, have developed an organized and cohesive team, as evidenced in…."
>
> "I will continue to work with each staff member to help them develop and achieve their potential. I will also continue to study assessment theories and practices to improve my supervision effectiveness."
>
> "It is imperative that we establish a cogent, articulated process, from training to recruitment to retention of these teachers."
>
> "I plan to use, not only the degree which I will ultimately earn, but the…. skills I already possess."
>
> "I have been extremely effective, ….the synthesis of this information has shown me the rationale behind what I have been doing by instinct."

Collaboration in Reflections

Collaboration was another emergent theme. The reflections of all women evidenced more attention to seeking input, to providing forums for problem-solving, to promoting ownership by all of the problem, and to involving the staff in solutions and in planning for the future. More "we", or third person statements, about collaboration were used in the reflections of women. Examples follow:

"Collaborative decision-making in the hands of teachers regarding what is taught, how it is taught, and how it is assessed holds great promise for authentic professional growth and for improvement of instruction."

"A commitment to sharing relevant scholarly efforts with teachers, to thoughtful analysis of student data and to personal inquiry is the center of my professional life. For that reason, these artifacts are simple examples of what I consider to be most essential to informing my practice as a school district administrator."

"All members of the school family were able to express their personal concerns freely. There was an openness of the collaboration that allowed teachers to feel comfortable sharing their areas of weakness and strengths. Communicating and involving all school members in the decision making allowed this trust to blossom at …."

"As a collaborative group, my staff is going to take a hard look at our discipline management plan, as I see certain procedures as ineffective and working against the students and staff."

"…brings to light the value of collaboration between colleagues."

"Teacher power is very important to me."

"At the end of the second semester, the faculty gave written feedback about the progress of the plan."

"We made a campus decision…."

The males' reflections either evidenced non-collaborative statements or made no reference to collaboration. One male mentioned collaboration in this way: "There is practically no time for collaboration and staff development….. My job, as instructional leader, should be to create the opportunities for growth in my staff." Although this male appeared to recognize the need for collaboration, he did not address how he might create the climate for collaboration. Representative comments that fail to address collaboration are:

"As a leader, one must search out the best ways to address problems specific to his/her campus."

"As leaders, we must seek the best forms of assessment that fit our student population, then provide the resources for training in that area."

"I intend to provide more in-depth knowledge of curricular issues as well as the means to deliver an improved curriculum to all of the students for whom I am responsible. It will be in this manner that I will work to make teachers the best teachers they can be so that their students will ....."

"I have committed the Technology Department to take the leadership in providing curriculum and instructional awareness in the technology application strand of the TEKS."

"It is my responsibility, as Director of Technology, to provide this vision and leadership and facilitate the implementation of technology throughout all facets of education, as evidenced by the Technology Plan, which I developed."

"In my role as an educational leader, it will be imperative that I model the work of Guskey and Sparks. In addition, I must forge processes that will lead to sustained staff development efforts. To overcome complacency will be a difficult challenge."

Implications

This study was limited to an analysis of 91 written reflections in professional development portfolios of school leaders in an educational leadership doctoral cohort program. The study revealed gendered dichotomies in five areas – length, structure, voice, confidence, and collaboration. The writing of the men revealed more confidence than did that of women. The discovery of these dichotomies is significant in at least two areas. First, professional development portfolio pieces may become pieces of the career advancement portfolio (Brown & Irby, 1997). As potential employers read these reflections, the potential candidate is scrutinized for written language content in the

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reflective narratives. If the language presented by the candidate is perceived as "weak," then the candidate's impact is lessened and chances to obtain an interview, or the leadership position itself, are sabotaged. Secondly, school leaders must frequently communicate in writing with staff, parents, and community members. This writing must reflect confidence and competence, as a perception of weakness on the part of a school executive can negatively impact credibility. Analysis of examples of other written communication of men and women needs to be conducted in order to determine whether this perceived lack of confidence is evidenced in writings other than portfolio reflections.

The reflections of the women in this study evidenced a commitment to collaborative processes. It is important that school leaders be perceived as focusing on teacher empowerment, team building, and collaboration. Organizational leaders are expected to build collaborative cultures; as they seek to move up the ladder in administrative ranks, this is a skill that Superintendents and Boards desire. Thus, it is imperative that reflections which express experiences, beliefs, and values and which are contained within a career advancement portfolio include references to the process of collaboration. Additional writing of the men in this study should be analyzed to determine whether this lack of reference to collaboration and team building is merely an oversight in these reflections, whether it is indicative of their leadership practice, or whether it is a lack of awareness of their need for growth in this area.

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